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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: DOZENS BLOCKED FROM HOMES IN OTOBIA, ABKHAZIA

**¶1.** (SBU) Summary and comment. Although conflicting reports make it difficult to establish a precise chain of events, dozens of individuals were blocked from their homes in Otobaia after a resident of the village was detained and then fled from Abkhazia. The Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called in ambassadors to protest the incident, lay blame at the feet of the Russians, and seek support from the international community. The dispute resolution mechanism agreed to in Geneva is not yet operational and therefore unavailable to help resolve the situation. The incident serves to underline the importance of the mechanism. End summary and comment.

**¶2.** (SBU) The EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM), UNOMIG, and Georgian government have all attempted to investigate the incident, and all have offered different versions of the basic facts. Virtually all of the information available outside Abkhazia comes from the reports of locals involved, and their accounts vary widely. The following chronology is an attempt to reconcile information from all three sources. Abkhaz de facto officials have been quoted in the press as denying the entire incident.

#### INITIAL DETENTION

**¶3.** (SBU) UNOMIG reported that on February 25, Ika Bigvava, a 25-year-old resident of Otobaia (a village just inside the Abkhaz administrative boundary, north of Ganmukhuri), was detained by Abkhaz forces. Some reports suggested the detention was by unidentified masked men. The ministry of foreign affairs said the reason for the detention was that Bigvava refused to be conscripted into the Abkhaz militia; some press reports blamed it on the fact that Bigvava was carrying a Georgian passport. EUMM reported he was shot in the foot while in detention and that Bigvava made public allegations of mistreatment at the hands of Abkhaz forces. On February 26, UNOMIG reported residents from Otobaia helped Bigvava flee from Otobaia across the administrative boundary into Zugdidi.

#### MASS DETENTIONS OR BLOCKING OF ACCESS TO HOMES

**¶4.** (SBU) On February 26, UNOMIG reported twenty or more individuals either returning across the boundary to Otobaia or already in Otobaia -- some of whom may have assisted Bigvava -- were detained by Abkhaz forces. EUMM reported that some individuals were not detained, but prevented from crossing back into Abkhazia; EUMM also reported that some of those affected may have been making regular movements across the boundary to conduct personal business and were not involved in assisting Bigvava. The Foreign Ministry reported Abkhaz forces went door-to-door in Otobaia, looking for Bigvava, and detained individuals in the process. UNOMIG reported at least some of the detainees, in particular women and children, were released the same evening, but then children were again detained on February 27; one detainee was

allowed medicine for a known medical condition. EUMM reported the blocking of access/detentions were at least partially in response to Bigvava's departure, and that Abkhaz forces demanded a retraction of Bigvava's accusations of mistreatment while in detention before individuals would be allowed to return to their homes. UNOMIG reported Abkhaz forces demanded custody of Bigvava or his father before individuals would be allowed to return.

¶ 15. (SBU) The number of people affected by these events has been particularly hard to determine with any precision. The ministry of foreign affairs said 50 families were blocked. Qministry of foreign affairs said 50 families were blocked from their homes in Otdobaia, but then said at least some had been allowed to return to their homes; most press accounts cite this figure. EUMM reported 40 individuals were blocked; UNOMIG reported twenty or more.

¶ 16. (SBU) It also remains unclear how many of those affected were actually detained and how many were only prevented from crossing back into Abkhazia or accessing their homes. At the Foreign Ministry, when asked where exactly the affected individuals were located at present, Deputy Minister Alexander Nalbandov could not give a precise answer. A UNHCR representative, however, said the organization had agreed to provide shelter and provisions for 60 individuals in Zugdidi.

#### POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

¶ 17. (SBU) Nalbandov laid blame for the incident squarely at the feet of the Russians, saying that Abkhaz forces acted with Russian permission, and that furthermore the Russian Federation, as an occupying power, bears responsibility for any actions carried out in Abkhazia. He noted that, although

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the dispute resolution mechanism agreed to in Geneva would have been a useful mechanism to resolve such a situation, the Abkhaz de facto authorities today issued a statement saying that they would not cooperate with the mechanism until the UN changes its mandate and sends an independent mission to Abkhazia.

#### COMMENT

¶ 18. (SBU) Nalbandov is indeed correct -- this is precisely the kind of situation that a dispute resolution mechanism would be ideally suited to resolve. As we feared in Geneva, it has proven difficult to implement the mechanism so far, and today's comments by Abkhaz de facto authorities suggest they have little intention to make a serious effort to do so.

TEFFT